Interview with Carl Jenkins, afc2016037_04060
August 16, 2017
Interviewed at Jenkins Funeral Home and Cremation Service, Newton, North Carolina, by Sarah Bryan for Folklife of the Funeral Services Profession

Sarah Bryan: For the recording, let me ask you to introduce yourself and let me know where we are.

Carl Jenkins: My name is Carl Jenkins, and I'm the owner of Jenkins Funeral Home and Cremation Service in Newton, North Carolina.

SB: Just before the recording started we were, you were starting to tell me about your first experience with the funeral services profession.

CJ: How I became involved and my influences. When I was 16—this was in 1974—my father passed away. He had had some heart issues prior to that, and died of a heart attack. And it was on Christmas Eve, ironically. The funeral director came to my house, and that's the first time I knew what their role was all about. But I was able to see first-hand what he was able to do in that setting. And my mom was lying on the sofa in our den. I sat across the room when he came in. I could see in the distance a few folks coming into our home, bringing in food, and they wanted to see my mom of course. And I saw them kind of put their hand up on the mouth and say, "Oh, okay, I'll be quiet," because they saw her lying on the sofa and somebody in the kitchen said where she was, and they would just say, "Okay, I'll see her later." So she's on the sofa, grieving, I'm in the chair across the room, I'm watching this happen. And this funeral director, his name was Gene Freeman, he walked in, and they showed him into the room where she was. He knelt down, held her hand, and what I call sprinkled magic dust over her. I don't know any other way to describe it, because that's what it seemed like to a 16-year-old at the time. When he rose up, she got up as well, and started smiling and greeting her guests. And I'm sitting there thinking, "What—wow—what just happened?" And it still brings chills to my arms when I think about that. But it was just a neat experience. I thought, "That's pretty cool. Maybe I should check into that." Because I was 16, looking for something, didn't know what I was going to do career-wise. In the 11th grade a lot of my friends were writing off to schools, and getting acceptance letters. I hadn't even started. So, that made a lot of sense to me, to check into something like that. A real short story about that too, with Gene Freeman. Fast-forward a few years, I owned another funeral home, one of the sales reps came by, he said, "Gene has had a heart attack. Did you hear about that?" I said, "No, I hadn't." "You need to call him." I told him what an influence he was on my life, he says, "You need to call him." So I called him, and I got his wife on the phone, and I told her who I was and why I was calling, and she started crying. And so, she says, but "He's resting now, but I beg you to call him back. Please do." She gave me the time to call, and I did. And when I called him, he started crying, after I told him who I was. And so we had a nice

conversation, he thanked me and we hung up. So fast-forward a number of years later to 2005, my brother's wife died in Fayetteville, and here I am three hours away, he wants me to handle the service. So I had her body picked up, and already had her casket selected—pre-selected, because she had cancer, and we were able to talk about some things ahead of time. So I drove a van down with the casket, and my wife and I helped with the service, and I told the funeral director that was at Sullivan's in Fayetteville that I'm going to need some help. They're the ones who picked up the body, and did the embalming for us. So I said, "I need some help. Do you have any part-timers that you could lend me? I'd pay them to help me out with the service, because I'm out of my area, and I need some help." I rented a hearse and rented a limo. He said, "Well, I've got So-and-So, I've got So-and-So, and I've got Gene Freeman." I said, "Are you kidding me? Gene Freeman is one of your part-timers?" He'd retired by then, he was in his eighties. And I said, "I want Gene." He gave me his phone number, and I called him up and reminded him who I was. He said, "Carl, I'd *love* to help you." So I was able to really kind of come full-circle. I was able to work with the guy that influenced me into funeral service. And it was just a really neat experience.

[00:05:00] And ironically, it turns out they're the same age.

SB: That's a wonderful story.

CJ: Thank you.

SB: I've been so struck by how funeral directors seem to have a brotherhood and sisterhood, that it really seems to be a supporting community, like the group that you were talking about.

CJ: Right. Right. There is a North Carolina association, there's the national association, neither of which I belong. At one time I did, when I was in another funeral home. I actually was a district director over our District 10, which meant I would be on the board of directors of the state association. That was a great experience, and there was that support. You know, you got to meet a lot of folks, go to conventions, and you know, you really have some camaraderie and fellowship, and at the same time, make lifetime friends. But I don't belong to that anymore. It's quite expensive. I didn't really see the value in it, versus the expense of it. So I didn't join, but I have missed out on some of that benefit of camaraderie. And so that's why the study group is important to me.

SB: Well, going back to this first experience, prior to your father's passing, what had your impressions of funerals and the world of funeral services been, do you think?

CJ: Yeah. I only recall maybe two other instances in my life when I had attended funerals prior to that. One was when I was probably three years old, and one of my

little friends passed away. And I don't even know, I couldn't tell you his name now or I couldn't tell you what he died of. It was a disease that took his life. I remember seeing him in the casket, and it was a small casket. I mean, it was full-couch, so you could see his feet. I remember asking my mom why he just had his socks on and no shoes. And she held me up to view him in the casket. So that was one experience, and another was when my grandfather died—he was in South Carolina and we drove there. You know, I wasn't very impressionable, really. I never really dreamed that I would be in the funeral profession, so it didn't really have any kind of impact on me at all, those experiences. And it's not something that I would seek, or that I sought after, or that was a passion in my early life—until I met Gene Freeman, and then it became a passion. So. He was great.

SB: What was it in that moment that Mr. Freeman was counseling your mother, what was it about that—?

CJ: My dad told me, throughout my life, "Son, whatever you choose to do in life, be a professional at it, and do your best." But that word, professional, kept sticking in my mind. I think he meant be a doctor, but that's not what I wanted to be. (Laughs) When I would think about that, when I met Gene Freeman at an early age, it just sort of clicked, because he was the epitome, in my opinion, of a professional. So that was probably the greatest influence. A side story of that was a time—I forgot to tell you—was around the time of the 11th grade, I looked for a part-time job in the summer and on into the school year, and I just happened to find a job delivering flowers, at a florist. And so it connected real well into the funeral business. And little did I know at the time that you would, a florist would schedule all the funeral flowers at one time, at the end of the day, so they would be fresh for the visitation from seven to nine. You wouldn't want to take, make several deliveries during the day, you'd take them all at once. So I would take deliveries around four or five o'clock at each funeral home. As we were taking—I remember one funeral home in particular, it ended up being the one that I worked for—had a flower room that you would take them into. It had a sofa, TV, and a little bit of a lounge-like atmosphere. And I was passing by all of the Cadillacs parked in the parking lot, placing the flowers in the flower room, watching the funeral directors, saying hello to them. They're in their suits, they're watching TV.

[00:10:00] And I'm like, "Yeah, that's the job for me. Right there. I like that." Little did I know, they'd been up all night embalming, and dressing bodies, and going on death calls, and very little sleep. They'd worked funerals all day, in the heat and the snow, and this was the time of day when they could just relax for a few minutes and get ready for the visitation to start at seven o'clock. (Laughs) I was in for a big surprise.

SB: Their one moment of down-time.

CJ: Right.

[Pause in recording]

SB: You said your grandfather was in South Carolina. What part of South Carolina?

CJ: It was Conway.

SB: Conway, okay! I'm from Myrtle Beach originally.

[Chatting about Horry County, SC, genealogy, comparing notes about each other's relatives.]

SB: So then after you developed an interest in this profession, what was the next step?

CJ: Graduating from high school, and then seek out a mortuary school. Decide which path to take, whether to serve an internship first or to get the training through school. It so happened that around the same time, in my hometown of Fayetteville, they opened a mortuary school at the technical college. And so I thought, you know, "This is just meant to be." So I enrolled in the college, the funeral service education program. And I kept telling myself, "I can always transfer to another curriculum if I need to, if for some reason this doesn't work out, or if I just don't feel that I can stomach it." Because I had told myself that the first thing I see an embalming process I was probably going to throw up, but then I'll get over it and I'll be okay. But I didn't. (Laughs) So that was the next step. Enrolling into the mortuary program at Fayetteville. And that was a two-year Associate Degree program. And beyond that I went to Methodist College, and ended up with a Bachelor degree in psychology at North Carolina Wesleyan College in Rocky Mount.

SB: Are there many funeral directors who've studied psychology?

CJ: I really, I don't think so, but I don't know for sure. A lot of my friends are, do have a Bachelor degree, which is not required, but many do. But many don't.

SB: It seems like that would be a great asset in your work, to have that background.

CJ: I think so. Yeah. I think any—psychology or not, any kind of four-year degree would be beneficial. I think it just helps to make you a little more well-rounded, learn about a lot of different kinds of things. Gives you time to grow up before you go into business!

SB: You mentioned the, maybe, anxiety that you had before seeing an embalming. I'm interested in that aspect of funeral directors' experiences, because, you know, it

seems like we're all born with a sort of natural fear of dead bodies, or, you know, avoidance of death, but especially of like the clinical fact of a dead body. How do people in this field get past that? Or are many people born without that fear?

CJ: Hmm. Good question. It really didn't affect me like I thought it was going to, the first time I saw it. I think the main thing is, when I started working at the funeral home, soon after I enrolled in the curriculum, I was asked by one of the local funeral homes came by the school and said, "Do you have any students you could recommend? Because I have a vacancy at the apartment, to live in the apartment, answer the phone at night and go on death calls."

[00:15:07] And so I was chosen to do that, and I was grateful for it. Where was I going with that?

SB: Oh, about fear and aversion.

CJ: So, oh, that's right. So when, my first day on the job, one of the gentlemen was taking me around, showing me all the rooms, and we walked right into the embalming room like it was nothing, and there was the embalming process going on, there were two embalmers there working on a body, they were flexing and bending and, you know, working, massaging the tissue and all the things that you're supposed to do. And I'm looking at that and I'm thinking, "Hm, that's not so bad." The main thing I thought of, though, was, "I'm not supposed to be in here." I thought for some reason I wasn't allowed in there, but he was taking me in anyway. And I'm thinking, "I hope nobody catches me in here!" So that was the fear that I had, more so than the fear of any physiological functions.

SB: Was that—weren't supposed to be there like in a legal sense, or the rules, or propriety?

CJ: Right. I just didn't know. I was so young and so new to it, I just didn't know. I felt like that was a no-no to be in there, watching this body being embalmed, and I didn't know them, and they didn't know me. Since I've learned that you're not supposed to be in there unless you're a student or a registered apprentice or, you know.

SB: So let's see, so this was at Fayetteville Tech.

CJ: Right.

SB: And then when you finished school, what did you do next?

CJ: Well, I was already employed by this particular firm in Fayetteville, and I continued on with them, I finished my internship and got my funeral service license.

Continued working there for a period of time, and then, I think at age 21, I got married. Doing all the things that most people do, you know. You're starting your career, starting your life, with a wife, and thinking about starting a family at some point in time, and buying a home and those kinds of things. But I just wasn't making enough money to do that. I didn't feel that this place was providing me with the proper income to create that. So I started looking around to see what was out there, and found a place to move to, and seek employment elsewhere, at another funeral home. And everywhere that I've ever gone has always been kind of a stepping stone—with more funds, and more experience, different experience, because each firm is different, each locality is different. Each town is different, the people are different. All the places you go are different. But it was, each of those were a stepping stone for my career.

SB: Were these mostly in North Carolina?

CJ: All of them were in North Carolina. I'm North Carolina-licensed, so I didn't seek elsewhere. When you go to conventions and you meet a lot of funeral directors all across the state, it's a North Carolina convention, so you're going to meet all the North Carolina firms and owners and workers. So you get to know some of those folks, and then you think—you get offers occasionally when you're at a convention, like, "Hey, if you ever want to make a change, I'd like to talk to you," that kind of thing. So I had some contacts already that I could make.

SB: And how have you found working in different parts of the state? Let's say here in—is this Catawba County?

CJ: It is.

SB: Okay. Rather than Fayetteville. How have you found that, say, culturally different? If at all.

CJ: Um, not a lot of difference. You, I guess you make the best of whatever situation that you're in. But some things that I've learned, and it's hard to think back now, because I've been here so long—but I remember, I went to Statesville first, and then to Hickory, and then now Newton. One of the things that I noticed that they do here that they didn't do in Fayetteville is they put out road signs, "Slow, Funeral" signs. I thought that was odd. Why would you want to do that? Nobody's going to really slow down—I didn't think. And you're just identifying the house or the neighborhood. And the other thing they do is they have, they print what they call memorial folders in the western part of the state. We didn't do that in the eastern part of the state.

[00:20:00] So it's another detail, another task. Maybe another service, for sure. We do bulletins now instead of the memorial folders. People expect that. Another difference that I've noticed in the west, as opposed to the east, is the funeral lines, the visitation

lines. You go to the bank, you go to the grocery store, any retail establishment, you're going to stand in line to pay, or a restaurant, you'll stand in line to pay. And nobody likes lines. At a visitation, I noticed the lines were very lengthy, and I thought, "Wow, why do you do that? Nobody likes lines. Why do you do that?" It's like a wedding reception line. And that's the only place I've ever seen that. But that's how they do it here. And I think that I came to the conclusion that it's the facility, that maybe that's why, that maybe they don't have the space in certain facilities, so they have to do a line, because they don't have a big room like the one we're in now where you can be free, and then go to the person you want to speak to, and then leave. But in eastern North Carolina at the funeral homes there, that's what we did. They had big rooms, the body was in the casket, the flowers were all around. And the room was decorated with flowers, it wasn't just all grouped up where the casket was. But you could be anywhere in the room, and then people would come in and speak, and then they would leave. And they didn't have to stand in line to see every single member of the family. When I go to another funeral home, if someone chooses elsewhere and I go visit them in the visitation, I only know one person in the family, typically, but I've got to speak to 25 or 30 people. You're shaking hands with each one down the line, you're like, ah—what do you say? "I'm Carl Jenkins. I'm a friend of Joe's." And they don't know what to say. I just think it's awkward. But that's what we do. We've tried to do it differently here, and do that mingling concept. People will come in and say, "Where's the line?" I'd say, "There is no line. The family has chosen just to mingle." And they're just—you can see the look on their face. They're just so confused. They want a line. (Laughs) They want to get in that line!

SB: That is exactly the experience—I mean, you and I are from the same part of the Carolinas, more or less, and I grew up with exactly that, the mingling. And a few months ago a relative of mine from the Piedmont died[1], and I went to her funeral, and there was a line—and, "What are they doing? Is this a wedding?" And I—yeah, I felt so awkward. I didn't know.

CJ: I'm very used to it now, because that's what we do all the time. If you don't do it, people complain. I had one—well, several people—tell me how chaotic it was. (Laughs) Okay. I didn't think so, but okay. You go and talk to the person that you came to see, and then you leave. You don't have all this huge mass of people in your building at once. They come and go. It's so easy.

SB: Yeah. One person's chaos is another person's order.

CJ: Exactly.

---

[1] A November 2016 service for a 100-year-old woman, held at a funeral home in Star, North Carolina (Montgomery County).

SB: What about—let's see, I mentioned that I wanted to ask you about the Hmong communities here. What about other cultures, whose, you know, families you serve?

CJ: Well, we serve anybody that asks us to serve them, obviously, as any funeral home would. Here at Jenkins we have served the African American community, we've served Hispanics, and then of course the Hmong community. We're still predominantly white, but we're starting to see a little bit of a trend where we're serving more black families. And I don't really know the reason. Maybe it's because one family chooses us, and then their relatives want to use us too because they like the way we do things. Whatever. It could be facility, it could be cost. I don't know. But yeah. There's a mix, for sure.

SB: And how is the experience, in terms of your work, different from one culture to the next?

CJ: Um, in a Caucasian or white family, it's typically a 30-minute service, an hour service. So the length of the time that they would actually have a ceremony would actually be longer with the African American community. Hispanic is a lot longer as well.

[00:25:00] They like to, whether it's Catholic or Protestant, they want to be here all day. They want to be here all day, and they want to just be here, and not do anything, but just be on premises and just support one another. And with the Hmong community, they'll be here all weekend. And so it's very different. And it's different how we charge for that too, because we don't really charge by the hour, but we do have to be compensated for the facility and our time and our labor. It's different. With the Hmong community, it's not only all weekend but it's all night too. For the traditional Hmong—there's two sections of Hmong families here. There's the Christian Hmong, and then there's the traditional Hmong. Traditional are more ancestral worshippers. Christian Hmong, obviously, worship Christ. So with the Christian Hmong it's a shorter time that they're here. They might be here a Saturday at given times, with a break in between, and then on Sunday they'll have their—their whole church will come in and have their worship service at the funeral home, in our chapel, instead of having it at their church that day. And then after that they'll have a little more ceremony, and then we'll go to the burial. With the traditional Hmong, we'll be here from Friday at eight AM until Sunday at noon or one or two, and have the burial. And what they do during all that period of time is very different from what the Christian Hmong do.

SB: And what sort of things are those?

CJ: I knew you'd ask that.

SB: Is there a shaman involved?

CJ: Um, sometimes. And every family, every ceremony that I've—and we've had many, many, many—but they're all very different in certain ways. They're all very similar in a lot of ways. But some of the differences are I've seen them tie a string to the deceased's finger and they'll bring it all the way outside to a box where a chicken will be, and they'll tie that string to the chicken. There's some significance about the soul. And what they want to do all that time, is they—depending on the age of the person, if it's an older person, they're here to tell the story of that person's life, from the womb all the way to the death. Older person, they would be here longer, obviously. So there's chanting, there's the beating of the drum, there's the playing of the flute. There's announcements, there's food. They cook here, every meal, they serve everybody. If the person is more prominent in their Hmong community, they'll kill more cows. If less prominent, less cows. They feel like they have to serve everybody who comes in and honors them with their presence. They'll also, what I call pay at the door. They pay cash to—there'll generally be someone taking donations, taking money. Those denominations of bills are usually hundred-dollar bills. They'll schedule a funeral out three weeks out, sometimes a month out, depending on the prominence of the person. They want the people in Fresno, California, and Wisconsin, and Minneapolis, to be able to have the opportunity to make plans to be here. If you walk in the parking lot and see all the license plates, you'll see California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, all over the place.

SB: People are actually driving from—

CJ: Mostly Toyotas too, ironically. (Laughs) Nissans and Toyotas. Very few American-made vehicles, which is interesting. Just an observation. But they want to give them plenty of time to make their, to get here, out of respect, obviously, but the other thing is they want them to—they want the more guests to be here so they can have more funds to pay for all the activities. The activities that we see from Friday to Sunday is just a minute portion of that. In the three weeks preceding that, from the death to the time of, the weekend of the ceremony, they'll have feasting at their homes, they'll set up tents at their homes, there's a lot of planning involved, they get someone to do the—the shaman? They'll have that person, they have to pay that person, they'll have someone to play the flute, and they have to line up—there's not that many people in the culture that do that, so they have to schedule a person. He may be scheduled every weekend at various places in the United States. Very interesting.

[00:30:00] SB: Very interesting, yeah. Now, in those three weeks, has the deceased person been cremated, embalmed and waiting for the service?

CJ: They don't cremate. It's very traditional. A person will be embalmed by us. We have an on-site cooler, refrigeration unit. We'll place the person in the refrigeration all that time. It's very important for that. And the other thing, we'll place what we call massage cream, funeral directors call it massage cream but it's actually, it's a lotion, it's

a moisturizing cream that we apply very heavily on the face and hands. Keeping a body out that long would typically cause dehydration, particularly in a refrigeration unit, so the moisturizing is a very, very important aspect of that. The type of embalming fluid is also very important that we choose. We've kind of perfected that. It's probably little-known around the country, the type of fluid that we use, because we're one of the very few funeral homes that serves the Hmong culture, so, where they would have a need to keep the body for three weeks, to develop this particular kind of fluid for that. And it's one that has—in the embalming process fluids are rated by index, and the higher the index, the stronger the fluid. So in the case, it would fix the tissue faster, and keep it preserved for a longer period of time. But there's a problem with that. It dehydrates. And that's the other negative that we don't want to happen. So we have to have another component of that mixture, that solution, and that's called a humectant. And when that's placed inside there—there are very few strong fluids that have humectant. Usually it's one or the other. So we've found a company that has this chemical. We've researched it and found that this really works best for us—in most cases, I'd say 90 percent of the time. Unless there's some other variable that we're not aware of, some medicines that the person was taking, or some obesity situation, or traumatic accident or something like that. Normal cases, 90 percent of the time that works really well. Along with the other moisturizing and refrigeration. Those three components help us to preserve that body for a longer period of time and make them look as natural as possible.

SB: Now, this is something that was developed by a company?

CJ: Correct.

SB: This is not a formula that you've developed here.

CJ: No, no.

SB: Would that have come from, like, military use? Would that have been from sending soldiers home? How would they have come upon that formula?

CJ: The need, for many reasons, I suppose. Since the Hmong people have been in this country, I'm sure I'm not the only one that's ever asked them this question, "Provide something to me, or give me some idea about what I can do to— Because here's my problem. Help me solve my problem." And Dodge Chemical Company in Massachusetts has stepped up to the plate and provided this fluid. Now, whether it was developed specifically for the Hmong culture, I doubt it. There's probably many other uses. But it sure works well for us.

SB: That's very interesting, wow. Now, in terms of the service, you mentioned the string, which I'd never heard of—that's amazing—and the chicken. You also mentioned

the killing of cows. Is that— And I know sacrifice can be part of their rituals. Is that something that's—like, what are the legalities? Is that something that's done off-site?

CJ: It is. (Laughs) Yes. It's definitely done off-site. I witnessed the live chicken in the box, and I sort of cringe a bit when I see that because I'm like, "Uhh, I hope no other family members from other families that we're serving see that." I have seen a live pig here on the back of a pickup truck before, in the parking lot. You're walking by and you hear it squealing, you're like, "Whoa, what's that?" But it's not here long, and I've seen a trailer with cows on it, and I'm like—it kind of got me started a little bit, because I'm thinking, "I hope they know they're not going to—they don't have permission to kill that cow on our premises." And I think it's, for whatever reason it was here, I don't know, but it's generally known throughout the Hmong community, those that use us know how we operate, and they're very respectful of our premises.

[00:35:02] They know that we don't want that killing of the cow or any pig or any livestock on our—you know, that's not done here. There was a time, there was a family in the area that has a farm, and they have a big barn—it's a big metal building—that they chose to use it instead of our facility for the ceremony. So we manned it there 24 hours, we had staff there. And my son was one of those. And he called me on his cellphone, said, "Well, I've just seen something that I've never in my life seen and probably will never see again." I said, "What's that?" He said, "I just witnessed a guy took a gun up to the head of a cow and just shot him." And he's, "I—didn't know that I signed up for that." (Laughs) But that was what they did. They killed the cow. Now, they will bring the meat here on premises, and they will have a refrigeration unit brought in, that they store the meat. We built a pavilion—I don't know if you saw it when you came in—right outside of our parking lot. It's a pavilion that we use to store our vehicles, but that we also, when it's not used for that, when we have a Hmong service, they use it for an outdoor shelter. We have some ceiling fans, they have restrooms there, we have a—behind it is a patio with a wall that they can use to chop the meat, cook the food, and there's water service, there's drainage, there's a stainless-steel sink in place. We haven't gone so far as to put a roof on it, just for fire purposes, and to—you know, house it, house these, where they would be, as an indoor thing, or put a stove there. We did purchase a 10-burner gas stove. We haven't hooked it up yet. And the reason we haven't gone that far yet is because, just the market, the way it is, some of the Hmong families—as much as we've invested in this facility for them, in trying to accommodate them, they're not very loyal, and they'll go wherever the best deal is. There is a Hmong person that has moved in from Minnesota and he saw this as a market that he could use. He rented a restaurant facility that was not in operation, and he's renting it now, and a lot of the Hmong families are going that direction. So we've decided to halt our spending, because we want to see what's going to happen. It may be that they come back, and then we'll continue, but for now, we're not serving as many as we have in the past.

SB: Right. Now, is he doing funeral—I mean, the funerary services as well, the mortuary work—or just the sort of venue and hosting?

CJ: He's only doing the hosting at the facility. But I don't know if you're familiar with a national company called Service Corporation International, trade name Dignity.

SB: Yeah.

CJ: They're well saturated in our area, and it's my understanding that this person has a national contract with Dignity. I don't know when that runs out. He won't speak to us. I think he's afraid that if we negotiate with him and say, "Well, okay, let us be your funeral home," that we might entice the family to use our facility and cut him out. That's just my suspicion, I don't know. But either way. We're happy to service anybody that chooses us. And we still serve some Hmong families. And we just have a feeling that that's a trend and it won't be there for long.

SB: That's so interesting, the sort of accommodations that people make to each other's cultures.

CJ: Mm-hmm. We've spent tons of money here. This facility that we're sitting in now, called the Celebration Center, we really built it with them in mind. We would go to each family over a period of time, a period of years, "What do you need from us? What does your culture need from us? How can we accommodate you? You're a good niche market for us, we love your people." We actually have someone on our staff who is Hmong—we have two, two people. They're out in the Hmong community telling our story and letting them know what we can do for them. And so we've done a lot of those things. We've increased the size of our parking lot, we've added the pavilion, we have our own cemetery where a lot of Hmong people are buried. We have an inventory of grave spaces at other cemeteries, that we own, and we can accommodate them at those cemeteries as well.

[00:40:00] And we have this facility, that's, you know, well over $300,000. So it's a little disheartening to invest that and then to watch them go away. But at the same time, we've been able to use this for many other uses and many other families, other events other than funeral events. Like I mentioned earlier, birthday parties. We've had family reunions here. And it's not expensive to rent it. It's just that we want it to be utilized, and we want to let folks know what we can do for them.

SB: Right. Have the investment return.

CJ: Mm-hmm.

SB: What is involved in operating cemetery space? Is that— That's behind the building, right?

CJ: Correct. Our cemetery is a private cemetery, meaning we are the owners of the land. It's not a perpetual care cemetery like a memorial park. That would be regulated by the state. They have to get a license. There's certain requirements in order to stay in business and to actually go in business. To open a cemetery you've got to have so much money set aside in a fund, and so much land, like 30 acres or something like that. Obviously, this land is attached to our facility and our property. So when the church sold us this property, they couldn't separate the deed because the graves were so close. And so we took the good with the bad. And the bad is that if we were going to open a funeral home we'd love to be able to drive around it and utilize the back part as well. The good part is that we have grave spaces that we can utilize.

[Pause in recording]

SB: Another thing I'm interested in is is there any sort of community pushback from, you know, surrounding non-Hmong communities to services? You mentioned being, you know, some anxiety about when the animal is in the parking lot and visible. Is that something that other people are at all—do you receive any feedback about that?

CJ: I do get some feedback. Mainly from, say, we're out at a restaurant or out in public somewhere, and we'll introduce ourselves to some new folks, and they'll say, "Oh, you're the ones that, I drive by your place and you have these all-night funerals." Or "these all-night parties," they'll call them. And at first I don't know how they mean it, or I'm a little taken aback by it. But I try to make it a positive spin, and I tell them, "Yeah, these are the Hmong folks, and they're very good people." And then they'll invariably say, "Oh yeah, I know! We work with some folks and they're really good people." So it's not negative. They don't specifically say anything about animals. I did have—we are next-door to a school also, and so—I was just telling somebody this today—I had a teacher call me one day, and they're, the kids are out on the playground, and there's a service going on on a Friday. And there's Hmong folks out at our pavilion, which is close to the playground. There's some Leyland cypresses that separate, so you can hear what's going on over there, and I'm sure they can hear what's going on over here. And so the teacher called and complained, very disturbed that we would kill a pig on our property and that the kids made a comment about it to her and she wanted to make a phone call. Of course I assured her that didn't happen, it was, the squealing that she heard was probably one of the kids squealing, or some of the loud folks talking or laughing out at the pavilion. But I just had to make her assured that that didn't happen here and I wouldn't allow it. And I actually walked out to make sure. But it was none of that. I didn't see any blood, didn't see any pigs. (Laughs)

SB: And just a sort of inter-religious level, there's not—I mean, this is a fairly conservative Protestant area, isn't it?

CJ: Right.

SB: Is it—just in terms of other people exercising religious rituals outside, is there discomfort with that?

CJ: Um, I haven't had any. I think most people are pretty tolerant about the different cultures. In this day and age people are a lot more tolerant about a lot of things.

[00:45:05] And so that's part of it. And by them, the Hmong folks are definitely a part of our society. There's a pretty good population here, and so they're part of the workforce, and they're in our factories and our manufacturing facilities. You go to a car garage and there's Hmong folks working there, you go to our school system, there's Hmong folks working there, you go to our medical facilities, there's Hmong folks working there. And so most of us know that there's—a lot of us know folks that are Hmong, and are friends with them or associates with them. So they, they treat it like anything else really. I don't really see it as being any issue whatsoever.

SB: All parts of the same community.

CJ: Right. The only thing is the comment that we hear about, "They don't"— That's when they see them in their workforce or in their everyday activities. What they don't see, what they don't understand, is the funeral rituals. So when they drive by our facility and they see cars, and people, all hours of the night, I want to ask them, "What are *you* doing up at that hour?" (Laughs)

SB: (Laughs) Maybe they're going to an all-night party.

CJ: Exactly. But it's okay. You know. At first I was a little reluctant, because I didn't want it to damage any other business, any other families, I didn't want them having negative responses to what we do. And I'm sure there's some of that that we don't hear about. But I think generally, our business has grown by leaps and bounds. I would say that we're not getting any negative feedback about that.

SB: I think that that's—I mean, just speaking as somebody from the Carolinas, I think that's something that people in other parts of the country don't understand about us, that there is that diversity and community meshing.

CJ: Yeah. Well, the other point is that our facility is conducive, because we try to accommodate their needs. On the side of the building that you're on right now is where you would see the Hmong family. They would be in this room, we have a basement-

level gathering center that they would use as well. Restrooms there, a big—it's like the fellowship hall of a church. We have our pavilion, the parking lot. Other than some parking on the other side of the building, there's really no need for the Hmongs to be over there. We've actually had, on Saturdays when they would be there, we've had services in our chapel with other families. So we have both going on at the same time, and it's never been a problem.

SB: Now, shifting topics a bit, how do you personally—actually, this is a very different topic—how do you personally take care of yourself emotionally when, you know, you're dealing with a call that's particularly traumatic, an especially sad death. I mean, that must be something that you deal with frequently. How are funeral directors resilient enough to handle that?

CJ: Good question. The first thing that comes to my mind when you ask that question is—I guess it's because I've been a funeral director all my adult life, so I am resilient to trauma and blood and gore, and those traumatic deaths, and those grieving families that are so outwardly grieving. The first thing that came to my mind, though, is that it's not that so much that bothers me, that really takes its toll on me. It's more that public that tries to get something for nothing, and tries my patience. Just unreasonable. Those are the families that I have a harder time dealing with. And you try to keep your cool, you try to be professional and businesslike, and be compassionate, all at the same time. It's actually different. We had a situation just recently with a family that I'd never, in all my years, I'd never experienced. That was the thing that I wrote to some of my study group comrades about. I actually had to ask this certain family member, "You're not very happy with us right now, are you?"

[00:50:05] And he couldn't really answer that in the affirmative. He said, "Well, mostly positive, but—" And so I came back at him and said, "Well, no, what I'm getting from you is that you're not happy." And so, "We've already done a certain portion of service for you. We're going to keep that money. But you've paid us for some other things that we haven't done yet. I'm going to refund that money, and perhaps you'd feel more comfortable going somewhere else." And so I've probably done that maybe twice in my career, over thirty-some years. This guy was the worst. He was absolutely the worst. But you know, he wouldn't accept it, "Oh, no, no, no, I want you to—" And the bottom line was he wanted something for nothing, and he was being very unreasonable about it, and very belligerent about it, and insulting to us about it. But those are the kinds of families that I'm starting to—not to that degree—but I'm starting to see some of that in the general public, that are being a little more unreasonable these days. And that is really weighing on me quite a bit, as a—I'm not old, but I'm an older funeral director. I'm not young. And through my career, I haven't ever had to experience that. Most people have always been very grateful and gracious, and sure, they experience grief and they experience anger, but never to the degree that I experienced this past week. And I know that's all fresh on my mind and probably why

I'm talking about it. I am noticing a trend, and I hope it's—I hope it's not a trend, I hope it's just a fluke, a cycle that we're going to get through—that the public is being a little unreasonable these days.

SB: What do you think is spurring that? What's that due to?

CJ: Economy? I don't know. Maybe it's the economy. I'm sensing also that, you know, cremation is on the rise, it's a disposable body now. It used to be a body where it was very reverent, it was very respected, and we did things with rituals and ceremony that were traditional but also therapeutic. And it's almost like people don't care anymore. And I don't know if it's the transient society, or it's the economy, or— Who would have ever thought that a 90-year-old woman would be cremated in 2017? When she was born and all through her life she always felt that she was going to be buried, and probably had a cemetery where all of her relatives are buried. So she goes to hospice and she has a lingering illness, and all through this process she probably has a life insurance policy that would take care of whatever her needs were. But the family makes a different decision. "Let's just cremate her. We don't want to see her. We've said our goodbyes at hospice. They gave us ample time to do that. We don't need to see her in a casket. We've had our therapy. It's easier, it's cheaper, and look at all the money we're going to save." And they don't see the value in not just the, not only the process of the visitation and the support of the community and the funeral service itself—the viewing of the body, they don't see the value of that—much less the value of having a final resting place for the mortal remains. And that's what cemeteries are for. Now we have columbariums with niches for cremation ashes, or cremains. And only a certain segment of the population will opt for that. A lot of them are just—some of them will say, "I don't care what you do with them, just dispose of them." "We don't do that. They're yours. You do with them— If you want to do that, that's fine. You want to scatter them, that's fine." And of course, people are saying, and I'm hearing this from families, "His wish was to be scattered at sea," or "scattered in the mountains." And so they're taking that, and they're taking it a step further, and fulfilling that request—which, I don't see—there's nothing wrong with, I'm just saying that bodies are a little more disposable now than they used to be. And it's a shame. I've talked with pastors that have a real problem with that. And so I don't know what the solution is, I don't think there is one, I think we're there. We're already at 70 percent cremation in America, and some people will not cremate. I probably will be buried instead of cremated, that's my wish.

[00:55:10] But my wife would rather be cremated. So (laughs) there you have it.

SB: Even within one family.

CJ: Correct. I tell her that she better die after me, because I'm the next of kin. I get to make that decision.

SB: Now, does that often put you in a difficult position in your work—I mean in addition to the question of cremation—but, you know, when the deceased person may have expressed, but in a non-legally-binding way, what their wishes were, but the family— And I know you have to follow what the family requests. But is that difficult for you, the conflict between what the deceased person has expressed and what their family decides to do?

CJ: I relate that to, years ago, when people would say to me, "Oh, just put me in a pine box." Or, "Just throw me in a ditch." Do they really mean that when they say that? I don't think so. I don't think—their family would not want to do that, of course, put someone in a ditch. But there are those cases where family members are conflicted among themselves about burial or cremation. And there is a compromise. Cremation provides many, many options for the disposal of the ashes. Niches, burial, columbariums, or mantles, in an urn; scattering, favorite place on earth. But the compromise can be, "Let's embalm the body, let's place his own clothing on him, place him in a ceremonial casket," not one that you purchase but one that is used over and over. Just the interior is cremated with the body. The exterior is a shell that's used over and over. We call it a ceremonial casket. And let's have a funeral service and a receiving of friends, and instead of going to the cemetery for the burial, everyone dismisses, and we cremate the interior of that casket with the body, and then we provide them with the cremains, and they can do whatever they wish to do with the cremains. They can scatter if that was his wish, or they can bury them at a cemetery along with other family members, or they can put him in an urn on the mantle. Whatever they choose to do, it provides lots of options. So that is, that's one compromise that can take place. Other compromises are let's have what's called a private family viewing. No ceremony. Have a memorial service, usually after the cremation, at their church with their own pastor involved, or they can have it at our chapel with their involvement, or at a church with our involvement. We do all three. But the private family viewing is where we embalm, dress them in their own clothing, place them in a ceremonial casket, provide a private room for up to an hour to let them say their goodbyes. They can invite anybody in that they want, family and/or friends. Not a ceremony but just a gathering of friends to say goodbye. There's also, you can have a public visitation with the body present, and no ceremony. And of course after cremation you can have the ceremony, which is called a celebration of life or a memorial service, that can be done anywhere. So try to interject some of those compromises into there, and see what they bite. What they (?). I've seen it happen time and time again, we're in the arrangement conference, and the decision has been made, it's cremation—no viewing, no ceremony. Then you see some tears start to flow on one family member. And everybody's attention goes to those tears, and they say, "What's wrong? Are you okay?" "I want to see my daddy," or, "I want to see my grandpa." So a different decision gets made at that point. So. Sometimes it's up to the last minute, when different decisions are made.

SB: That also reminds me of something I was going to ask earlier. We've talked about different religions and different religious services; what about totally secular services? Are there many of those in this area, or people who choose to have, you know, a non-religious observance?

[01:00:00] CJ: Probably very few. We're in the Bible Belt. Churches on just about every corner. And even, I would say, in a lot of families, and even in my own family—I happen to be a Christian, and I know what that means to me, but I have family members that don't go to church, and they claim to be a Christian, and to whatever degree they are comfortable with that, it's fine with me. I could certainly talk to them more about that, (probably?) I should, but I haven't. It's their choice. But there are lots of family members that we work with that, if we were to ask them, "What denomination are you?" or "What religion are you?" "What's your beliefs?" they'd say, "Well, I'm a Christian. They don't really know what that means, because they probably haven't set foot in a church or had a religious experience or they don't have a relationship with Jesus Christ (laughs), so I think most people identify as a Christian in our area, but there are a lot of unchurched people. And so sometimes we're faced with, "Well, do you have somebody that we can get?" And sure, we have pastors that tell us all the time, "If you ever have someone that needs a pastor, let me know and I can help." But I typically ask them for an honorarium to give to that person. Because there's a lot of credentials involved. Lot of planning involved. They need to be paid for their services, and so I try to help them out on that aspect of it. So there's a lot of—not a lot, but occasionally there are times when they all of a sudden have a need for a pastor. (Laughs) Did that answer your question?

SB: Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. Yeah. Well, I wanted to ask just two sort of general questions to wrap up, but what do you think makes a good funeral director?

CJ: Oh wow. (Laughs) Um, I've been—gosh—I've been told all my career that I'm a good funeral director, by many people. And I don't want that to sound egotistical at all. I'm a very humble person, I'm very reserved. I'm a conservative, sentimental. My mother, I could—she's still living but I could kill her sometimes for instilling in me the sensitivity that I got from her. But if you take those attributes, the compassion along with it, I think that makes a good funeral director. I've been told that, and I've been told by many families, "Gosh, Carl, you're exactly what we needed at that time." They're always grateful, and they're thankful. Sometimes you walk into a conference, and you don't know the personalities, and you're trying to get to know them, sort out who's in charge, sorting out who's going to give me a hard time and who's going to work with me here. And lots of times they're very quiet and reserved, and they're either angry, or they're—I represent death to them. They're grieving, obviously. And I don't know where I stand with them at that point. But my attitude is, "I'm here to help. I'm going to be very accommodating to you. I'm going to advise you. You're hiring me to do that. I'll be businesslike, I'll be professional." I mean, I don't say those things, but that's what

I'm trying to relay through example. And for whatever it is that I do, by the end of that conference I get smiles out of them, and handshakes, sometimes hugs. And comments from them that say, "You've made this process a lot easier, and we sure are grateful for you." And I get notes and cars. We used to get pies and cakes, but we don't get those so much anymore.

SB: And what do you wish more people understood about your work and your field?

CJ: Oh wow.

SB: I know you've mentioned some of these things already.

CJ: I wish that families would understand what-all has to happen when somebody dies, and the things that we can help them with, and the things that we actually do help them with, a lot of them behind the scenes. But as I mentioned earlier, it seems like more and more families are wanting something for nothing, and we just can't give it away. There's some expertise involved, there's some credentials involved, education, there's quite a bit of investment, and there's a big payroll.

[01:05:10] And, okay, if you're not using all of that, fine, but don't try to beat me down and cheat me out of it. I just wish that they were more aware of what-all there is to do, and the things that we actually do do for them. And don't take me wrong, a lot of them do. Many, many do. They are very grateful. And I am appreciative of that. But there are those few that, I wish we could somehow educate them to that degree, make them aware of what-all is involved and that there is value in what we do.

SB: Is there anything that you've been hoping to talk about or cover in this that we haven't talked about? Anything you'd especially like to add?

CJ: Hmm. I really can't think of anything that pops out at the moment. We've covered a lot. But I keep going back to the value of the funeral and the therapy involved. I can't put my hands on it, but I have heard through the years that there was a study from, in Vietnam, where bodies were brought back—some were intact, some were not, some were open-casket, some were not—and that through the years these folks have kept up with these families and tried to get a gauge of the grief and where they stood, and how well they tolerated the grief. The result was that the ones that were able to view the body, and they could find—I don't like the word "closure"—but they could find that, it was more helpful to them in their grief process. And those that did not, of course, were just the opposite, and they struggled more. Just takes longer to get through that. So I take that to mean that there is therapy, there is value in the open casket, and whether they're going to cremate or not, there should be some respect of the body and some viewing process, whether it be a clinical viewing or a private family

viewing, or a public visitation—I really like that. And it's not just because of the money, it's not just because of the revenue source, it's because I believe that there's value in it, and if there's something I could change about funeral service, that would be it. I wish we could reverse the trend of cremation. And if we can't do that, let's at least find more value in the therapy of viewing the body, and then proceeding with whatever we need to do at that point.

SB: This has been wonderful. Thank you.

CJ: Good. I appreciate it.

[End of recording]